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LOW COST HOUSING:
(how to avoid the "problem" in three words or less)

By

Carl P. Sharpe*

Because of the very nature of the paradigm within which this endeavor is conceived we have, in my opinion, misstated the problem.

Scientists and professionals often construct paradigms which allow them to limit the problems at hand to those they feel are solvable or at least those that they feel are worthy of their interest and not limited by their ability or lack thereof.

"We have become so accustomed to classifying scientific knowledge in a way that corresponds to the departmental structure of universities that we act as though Nature was so structured. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are no such things as physical problems, biological problems, psychological problems, economic problems, (housing problems), and so on. There are only problems; the disciplines of science represent different ways of looking at them."¹ The parentheses were added.

There are opportunities and pitfalls in the paradigms of specialized knowledge jargons and insights, yet we are definitely in a superior position if we recognize their limitations and are self-conscious about our approaches and definitions. This self-awareness is critical if we are truly concerned about alleviating the causes of the disparities which we observe.

LOW-COST HOUSING IS A SOLUTION LOOKING FOR A PROBLEM.

We have for some time observed the negative situation of inadequate shelter for low-income families which I contend is the problem. Low-cost housing is but one solution. If we examine low-cost housing as a problem we decide that solutions such as industrialized housing, federal support to housing supply, etc. are reasonable ideas.

If, on the other hand, we identify the problem as shelter for low-income people, the emphasis is on people, and we therefore examine the context within which people are operating and attempt to focus on the causes of the symptoms observed. This would lead us to examining job training, education, economics, federal subsidies to people, migration patterns, motivation, etc.

One pitfall with the approach I am suggesting is that the enlarged scope of our concern increases the difficulties of articulating and dealing with the problem and in deciding upon appropriate strategies. As noted earlier, this is often the excuse for artificially limiting the problem so as to bring it into line with our inabilities. This limitation, however, may easily be the point at which we effectively exclude ourselves from relevant strategies for alleviating the causes of the disparities which, as stated before, is the poor and inadequate housing which is consistently relegated to lower economic groups.

If we accept the above hypothesis, then we arrive at a sacred proposition. The problem area we construct must be large enough to include a high likelihood of our examination of strategies relevant to the observed situation and small enough so as not to exceed our capabilities to deal with it. LOW-COST HOUSING AS A PROBLEM AREA DOES NOT CONTAIN SOLUTIONS TO THE OBSERVED INADEQUACIES OF THE LOW-INCOME PEOPLE LIVING IN CURRENTLY INADEQUATE HOUSING. Although one of many, the approach discussed later does.

INADEQUATE HOUSING IS A SYMPTOM OF THE INABILITY OF THE PEOPLE LIVING IN IT TO COMPETE WITH SUCCESS WITHIN AN ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL SYSTEM FOR THE HOUSING WHICH BY COMPARISON IS NOT INADEQUATE. Merely providing said people with adequate housing will not effectively change this situation; it will suffice only in temporarily removing a highly visible symptom. Removing the symptom without alleviating the problem will likely aggravate the problem, as stated, by submerging it and thus allowing the situation to decay further unattended.

This is similar to the anxiety expressed by a local educator who was remorseful over the removal of outdoor toilets from the last such school because it was the only visible symbol he could use to promote money for education. Double sessions, currently practiced, was a dead issue.

At best we may conclude that inadequate housing affects self-perception, psychological frustration, and the physical health and well-being of the people living in it. By definition that is what makes it inadequate. We can easily say the same things concerning forced segregation by race, income, origin, education, etc. IF THE PEOPLE TO WHOM LOW-INCOME HOUSING IS RELEGATED WERE ABLE TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY FOR THE GOOD LIFE, THEN DILAPIDATED, INADEQUATE HOUSING WOULD DISAPPEAR AS A SYMPTOM, SINCE WE WILL HAVE SOLVED THE PROBLEM.

AN APPROACH BY EXAMPLE:

The problem we have addressed ourselves to is to evolve a strategy to assist 1,000,000 poverty stricken people (there were 32 million in 1957 by national definition) who, because of their current situation, have failed to compete successfully for housing, jobs, social and recreational amenities, and psychological well-being. IT IS CRITICAL TO REALIZE THAT THESE ITEMS ARE NOT SEPARABLE OR INDIVIDUALLY SOLVABLE.

The following are the ingredients of the New Community System now being planned by the University of Louisville's Urban Studies Center

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to help solve the impacted problems of poverty in America, rural and urban.

The concept is simple, although its implementation requires the carefully planned, systematic blending of all of its aspects.

It involves the development of a system that will assist as many as one million poverty-stricken families to move, voluntarily, into both productive employment and a socially supportive environment in New Communities.

These planned communities would be developed in the outer fringes of economically thrusting medium-sized urban regions where labor is needed to realize present and future economic growth potentials. Located thus, these New Communities would provide the added advantage of helping to balance the inexorable trend toward urban sprawl and one class communities.

To avoid "one classness" and provide a socially and economically balanced population as part of the supportive environment, steps would be taken to attract to the New Communities an equal number of "non problem" people--those already gainfully employed in the urban region, particularly those so-called "forgotten Americans" within the lower-middle income range of \$5,000-\$10,000* a year, plus those needed for managerial positions.

To test this systems approach, the Office of Economic Opportunity in May 1969 funded the Urban Studies Center to develop pre-operational plans for the first of the proposed New Communities. Kentucky, quite naturally, was selected as the site for our proposed demonstration.

The proposed New Community is being planned for a location in the outer fringes of the Louisville urban region, within 30 commuting minutes of the highly-developed industrial-commercial-service complexes that surround the city. The city's deteriorating central neighborhoods and the economically depressed Appalachian region of East Kentucky are considered the primary sources for those prospective residents who will need assistance to voluntarily relocate to the designed community.

The pilot community is being planned for 20,000 families, or a population of 80,000. Included would be 10,000 non-employed and under-employed families, half from inner-city neighborhoods and half from among rural residents already predisposed to migration. It is expected another 5,000 families would be naturally drawn to the New Community for the managerial and administrative positions that will be available there, usually at salaries above \$9,000 or \$10,000* a year. The final 5,000 would be made up of those already productively employed in the region but who would be drawn by the convenience and attractiveness of the designed community. The New Community would be particularly attractive to the moderate (\$5,000-\$10,000 a year income worker whose upward mobility has otherwise been severely restricted--and "forgotten" --in the inflationary crunch of recent years.

Such a development, involving housing, schools, shops, and other facilities for 20,000 families, would achieve the economies of scale and the maximum probabilities for success.

JOBS--DECENT ONES THAT PAY RESPECTABLE LIVING WAGES--ARE ESSENTIAL TO PAVE THE ASSISTED MIGRANTS' WAY TO PRODUCTIVE TAXPAYING, SELF-SUPPORTING SECURITY. THIS IN ITSELF COULD SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF HOUSING FOR LOW-INCOME PEOPLE WITHOUT INTENSE EXAMINATION OF LOW COST HOUSING. The jobs to be sought are those that pay at least \$6,000* a year, which will enable the poor to afford the new homes that would be built for them in the New Community as another key element for their transition into self-respecting existence.

The migrating families will be given comprehensive preparation and training both before they relocate and afterwards, to increase the probability of their successful transition into the new environment. Not only will the family breadwinners be trained for the specific jobs awaiting them, but also the family will be provided with advance orientation for urban life. The New Community's education system will be planned to provide compensatory schooling for all who need it, as well as continuing adult education. This is a critical issue to the problem of inability to compete with success for housing which would not be considered in the problem area low cost housing.

New, more sophisticated, and more realistic means for involving citizens at all levels in the planning and implementation of the New Community demonstration are being designed.

Also, there will be formed a broadly-representative non-profit Community Corporation, made up of urban and rural leaders collectively capable of securing the necessary public and private commitments to bring the New Community into being. Legislation, drafted by the Urban Studies Center, was passed by the 1970 state legislation and became law. It authorizes the establishment of New Community Districts and sets up the necessary District Corporation.

The concept of the New Community System developed from recognition that problems of poverty or lack of successful competition by some for the good life--or even the adequate life--in housing, jobs, mobility choice, self-realization, education, income, etc. were all at once causes and results. Failure to alleviate the problems in any one area had consequences on all the others. Thus housing must be examined as part of a system of interrelated phenomena both causing and being affected by all other elements within the problem system.

ALTHOUGH AN "INCOME STRATEGY" BASED ON EMPLOYMENT IS CRUCIAL, PERMANENT RELIEF FROM POVERTY AND ESCAPE FROM DEPENDENCE ON GOVERNMENT SUBSIDY REQUIRE MORE THAN A JOB. ALSO REQUIRED IS A POSITIVE SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT, BACKED UP BY SUPPORTIVE SERVICES,

*All figures herein refer to 1968 dollars.

TO COMPENSATE FOR DAMAGING DEPRIVATION WHICH IN MANY
CASES HAS CONTINUED FOR GENERATIONS.

The concept of the New Community System does not ignore efforts now underway to improve conditions both in depressed rural regions and in deprived deteriorated inner-city districts. Nor is the system offered as an alternative to these or other efforts to assist the poor.

However, it must be recognized that these efforts--commendable as they are--have not and cannot produce the necessary improvements, social and economical, fast enough to meet the immediate needs of all those who are in poverty NOW. The New Community System can--and can do it with relatively low investment of public funds that would be more than offset in increased productivity, savings on welfare costs, and new tax revenues.

Outright government subsidy would be minimal. Full implementation of the New Community System is expected to require no more than one-time government investment of \$7,000 for each family needing assistance to move out of poverty and into the planned New Community.

The \$7,000 per family would largely be "invested" in the areas of origin, in human resource development. The greater portion of this total would be invested in (1) training the heads of migrating families for specific jobs and for the modern world of work, (2) in preparing

the entire family for life in the New Community, and (3) to a lesser extent, in identifying and channeling private investment in the creation of new employment opportunities for those families needing assistance.

The point which must be emphasized is that dealing with the proper sets of issues has led us to a process of examining the inter-relationships between the causal elements, one of which is low cost housing. STARTING FROM LOW COST HOUSING AS A PROBLEM AREA WOULD HAVE EFFECTIVELY EXCLUDED US FROM THE REALM OF STRATEGIES WHICH CONTAIN RELEVANT SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF HOUSING FOR LOW INCOME GROUPS. What is involved is much more than a simple restatement of the problem area but includes a realistic look at the morphology of environmental problems.

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